

Switchback Consultation Response

Ministry of Justice, Prisons Strategy White Paper
Feb 2022

About Switchback

[Switchback](#) is an award-winning resettlement charity enabling young Londoners to find a way out of the justice system and build a stable, rewarding life. Switchback's model is centred on a meaningful relationship between Switchback Mentor and Switchback Trainee, beginning in prison and lasting as long as it takes after release. By combining intensive, skilled 1-to-1 support with real work training, we enable young men to make the changes they want to make in their lives.

Our pioneering approach works. In stark contrast to the national average – which sees nearly half of those leaving prison every year back inside within 12 months – just 9% of Switchback Trainees reoffend. In fact, over 50% go into long-term employment (compared to just 11% nationally) while 65% reach Switchback's own benchmark of Real, Lasting Change.

About this response

This response is based on Switchback's 14 years of successfully supporting young adults aged 18-30 – Switchback Trainees – to live life differently after prison. It draws on our data and evidence from delivering our through-the-gate programme in over 20 prisons since 2008, as well as the views and experiences of Switchback's Experts by Experience Board (comprising current and former Trainees) provided over the past two years. We also held a special meeting of Switchback's Experts by Experience Board in January 2022 to inform our response to the specific questions posed in this strategy.

Given the short timeframe for this response (eight weeks, including a Christmas break), we were unable to answer all the questions we would have liked. For small charities like Switchback, such a restrictive deadline does not allow for proper consultation with our staff and service users necessary for a comprehensive response to such an important strategy. To avoid missing out on the wealth of expertise held by voluntary and community organisations in the justice sector, we urge the Ministry of Justice to abide by the Cabinet Office Code of Practice for public consultations which requires government departments to provide a minimum of 12 weeks and longer timescales where feasible.¹

Our response

The government's long-term ambitions

Q1: Do you agree that these are the right long-term ambitions for the prison estate?

- Switchback welcomes the strategy's focus on supporting people in prison to turn away from crime through 'targeted resettlement support' and ensuring 'the basics are in place' upon release. Throughout the pandemic, Switchback has highlighted that a lack of access to basic essentials on release – housing, finance and technology – is driving reoffending, poverty and unemployment.² For example, during the pandemic, 65% of Switchback Trainees were released homeless, 46% with no bank account, 25% with no ID and 20% with no phone.³

¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100807/file47158.pdf p.9

² <https://switchback.org.uk/reshaperelease/>

³ <https://www.switchback.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Switchback-Briefing-Jan-21.pdf>

There remains an urgent need for action for the government to guarantee prison leavers “the basics” to survive and give people a real chance to change. We are glad to see this principle recognised in the strategy through the Resettlement Passport, and we would welcome the chance to work with the government on its implementation (see answer on the ‘Resettlement Passport’ below for more detail).

- However, we are concerned that the central ambition of the strategy, to cut crime and protect the public, will not be achieved without more substantial action to address a number of systemic barriers to resettlement outlined as follows.

a. Skilled, supportive relationships at the centre

- As Switchback’s evidence and impact shows, skilled, motivational relationships are essential to supporting people to change.

“Seeing my Switchback Mentor in prison meant I already knew her once I got out. She understands me and understands the journey I’m taking. If I was doing it by myself I reckon things would have gone off track by now.” – Daniel, Switchback Trainee.

- A workforce of “skilled and resilient prison officers, better able to build positive staff-prisoner relationships” is a welcome aim in the strategy and should be made central. We also welcome the commitment in the new probation model blueprint for probation practitioners to achieve the same.
- However, building these kind of supportive relationships will not be possible without action to tackle overcrowding, radically reduce staff caseload sizes and boost staff training and support (Switchback Mentors, for example, each work with around 5 young men at a time).⁴ In particular the strategy should introduce training in motivational relationship-building for prison and probation staff, drawing on decades of expert voluntary sector and lived expertise in this area.
- There is also a need to more radically shift working culture in prisons and probation, to more effectively balance risk management and enforcement with support and care. Switchback would be glad to share with the government how we effectively manage this balance to achieve a culture “in which supporting prisoners to turn their lives around forms a part of the approach of all staff”, as promised in the strategy.

b. Boosting involvement of specialist local charities

- Specialist, local voluntary sector organisations are best placed to build supportive relationships with prison leavers and connect them with local communities, benefiting from a level of independence and trust not always possible for prison or probation staff. This is particularly important for people in prison who are least likely to engage with government staff or services.
- Specialist local charities with proven impact should have a central role in any future prisons’ strategy. However, such organisations are currently excluded from the system and overlooked in this document. The Prison Education Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) the probation service’s Dynamic Framework (DF) were intended to widen access to contracts for smaller organisations, yet their financial and administrative demands have excluded the likes of Switchback. The division of contracts into ‘service categories’ such as employment or housing further denies access for person-centred resettlement organisations such as Switchback, who provide holistic support accounting for how these areas interact.

⁴ We elaborate on this point in our response to the Justice Select Committee inquiry into the probation service available at: <https://switchback.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Switchback-Evidence-to-Justice-Committee-Future-of-Probation-07-09-20.pdf>.

- Any new Prisons Strategy should recognise the value to be gained from greater voluntary sector involvement. In particular, it should include a firmer commitment for prisons and probation to engage with specialist local charities through more flexible funding models (Switchback successfully piloted such an approach with the London National Probation Service during the pandemic, before the DF excluded such an arrangement).

c. The need for a National Resettlement Plan

- The strategy includes a number of positive ideas to improve resettlement support, such as the ‘resettlement passport’ and action to boost employment, drugs and housing support. However, many previous governments have made similar commitments (including in the 2018 Prisoner Employment Strategy) with little impact on employment or reoffending rates.
- In our experience, one key reason that previous strategies have struggled to achieve their aims is the lack of a cohesive resettlement strategy to join up fragmented initiatives. As a result, prison leavers are often left on their own to navigate an increasingly complex web of services with little help along the way.
- Switchback, in contrast, shows the importance of a consistent, reliable single point of contact, supporting each Trainee to make a plan, navigate services and get the support he needs – whether that’s for drugs, employment, housing or health. Our approach recognises that employment, for example, cannot be seen in isolation from other areas of life, and only a more holistic approach can ensure people build the stability needed not only to get into work, but stay there long-term.
- We urge the government to collect and commit to creating a cross-government National Resettlement Plan, to join up its resettlement initiatives into a cohesive strategy and give people a real chance to access the support they need.

d. Reducing the prison population

- The strategy’s aim to cut crime and protect the public also risks being undermined by the commitment to build 20,000 additional prison places by the mid-2020s and a further “pipeline of accommodation” thereafter. This is a view echoed strongly by the young men we consulted about the government’s strategy.

“Prisons are so full of violence. Opening up more prisons is just going to mean more violence. They should focus on helping people to turn away from crime, not opening up new prisons”. – Kevin, Switchback Trainee.

“The most important thing is to give someone the option to change their life. There are not enough options right now. You need more community solutions, more jobs for the youth. Rather than spending money on new prisons, they should spend some of it on making sure every area has local charities and youth workers because at the moment there’s no one to tell you that you’re doing wrong”. – Switchback Trainee.

- As the MoJ will be aware, there is no international evidence linking larger prison populations to reduced crime. The idea of “more and better prisons” is not supported by the levels of violence at many newer prisons, or by international examples of expansionary approaches such as the United States. The strategy’s welcome commitment to tackle the “underlying causes of offending” is unlikely to be achieved without radically reducing the prison population to improve conditions and giving staff the time, and capacity, to provide the type of tailored support promised.
- Cutting crime and protecting the public through improving resettlement support is Switchback’s core expertise backed up by 14 years of proven impact. We would be glad to

work with the government, including with Switchback’s Experts by Experience Board of young prison leavers, to make this vision a reality.

e. Tackling racial disparities

- The strategy’s lack of focus on reducing racial disparities in the prison system is an alarming omission, particularly given the government’s previous commitments to do more in the wake of the Lammy Review. The Lammy Review laid bare the inequalities faced by people from ethnic minority backgrounds at every stage, including in prison and upon release. The new prisons strategy should therefore include a clear roadmap to improving equalities in prison, on release, and reducing racial disparities across the system.
- Switchback’s evidence from supporting young men mainly from Black and Asian backgrounds, shows that a tailored 1-to-1 approach to resettlement, taking into account the role of race, ethnicity and religion, can play a major role in reducing disparities by reducing reoffending.

Cutting crime and protecting the public

Leaving Prison with a Firm Foundation

Q6: Where can we go further to give prisoners the skills to secure stable employment on release?

- Switchback has a proven track record of successfully supporting young adult prison leavers into work. In contrast to the national average – which sees only 12% of prison leavers enter work – 55% of Switchback Trainees move into long-term employment.
- In our experience, a successful approach to prisoner employment depends on three principles:
 - **A holistic approach:** employability and training should not be seen in isolation from other areas of life, which often hold people back from building a stable life in work. By supporting Trainees to build stability in areas that are unstable for them – like drugs or mental health – Switchback Trainees can move into sustainable work and, crucially, stay there long-term.
 - **Focus on readiness for work:** in our experience, readiness for work is often more of a barrier than a lack of job opportunities. Many prison leavers, particularly younger men, have never worked before (including 41% of Switchback Trainees), and require exposure to the workplace to build confidence and skills, learn from mistakes and become ready for work. Switchback provides this by working with employer partners, such as the Café from Crisis and The Dusty Knuckle Bakery, who offer training placements in a real work environment for up to 12 weeks.
 - **Provide wrap-around support:** Switchback’s intensive 1-to-1 support runs parallel to our real work training and, crucially, does not end when someone moves into work. By providing a period of in-work support, Trainees have someone to speak to when challenges arise, and are supported to maintain motivation and keep going through the ups and downs, when many would otherwise drop out of work.

“If you get put in a job without dealing with your problems, you just explode and don’t go back to the job. You go back to your comfort zone: smoking cannabis or drinking, or whatever that person does to make them feel alive. I wouldn’t expect anyone to hold [a job] down to be honest, without something like Switchback and the [training] café in between. – Switchback Trainee.

Q7: What are the main issues and barriers that prison leavers face when they are making a claim for Universal Credit?

- Many young men supported by Switchback face continued barriers to accessing Universal Credit (UC), including:
 - **Lack of ID.** It is therefore welcome that the strategy commits to addressing ID as part of the Resettlement Passport. It is important that ID is widely accepted, such as a provisional license or passport. For UC, MoJ could work with DWP to allow for release papers to act as ID for the purposes of benefit claims.
 - **Lack of bank account.** As with ID, we welcome the strategy’s commitment to ensure everyone leaves prison with a bank account. However, we urge the MoJ to consider why banking access programmes to date have not achieved the outcomes intended. In Switchback’s experience, this is because of a lack of join-up between in-prison applications and local branches. The introduction of a Payment Exception Service – vouchers for UC claimants without a bank – is welcome but not widely communicated or understood by either prisoners or staff and should be expanded.
 - **Lack of technology.** Not having a phone (the case for 1 in 5 of Switchback Trainees upon their release) is a major barrier to applying for UC (and jobs, and other services) online. The prison leaver phonenumber is a welcome development allowing for offline access to UC, but should be better communicated to prisoners, staff and providers. Digital skills are also an issue.
 - **Debt** is another problem, including the way in which the Advanced Payment is structured as a loan which must be paid back out of later monthly payments, putting people straight into debt and below the level of income needed to survive. Switchback’s evidence shows that complementing the new Subsistence Payment with shopping vouchers, a travelcard and a basic smartphone gives people a more realistic platform for change.

“With Universal Credit, you could be waiting a while: a good month and a bit just to get your first payment. When you’ve left prison, you wouldn’t know what to do so end up probably doing what you did before that got you into prison just to get money, or even borrowing money off people which can cause more tension in your relationships. – Darren, Switchback Trainee

Q8: Should we take a legislative approach, as described above, for those at risk of reoffending who would otherwise be released on a Friday? If so, how should we structure this approach?

- We support the ending Friday releases, which often create additional barriers for people leaving prison with services closed over the weekend. Flexibility should be included to end pre-bank holiday releases, particularly over Christmas and New Year, which are often even more damaging given the time people must wait without any access to vital services. However, problems with the timing of releases are not restricted to Fridays, and include people being released at the end of any weekday, having no notice about their release or given the wrong date, as well as more fundamental systemic issues relating to a lack of basic essentials or 1-to-1 support on release. Releasing people at an appropriate time, with good notice and planning, must be part of a wider resettlement strategy to resolve all these issues.
- a. **Resettlement passport**

Q9: Do you agree with the ‘guiding principles’ and priority outcomes and areas of focus we have identified for developing the Resettlement Passports?

Q10: How can we implement the Resettlement Passport approach in a way which is most effective for prison leavers and practitioners?

Q11: How should we encourage prisoners and prison leavers to comply with conditions and expectations in return for support provided, and what consequences should be in place if they do not?

- The five guiding principles for the passport are a good start but will require significant investment and close working with the criminal justice sector experts to fill in the details and achieve them in practice.
 1. The commitment to achieve ‘clarity over who is accountable’ for resettlement outcomes is a vital step. Prison leavers and staff are often confused or mistaken about their responsibilities, duties or rights. This is a key cause of mistrust in the system, and will take a very significant cultural and systemic shift to resolve. This must include far clearer and more consistent communication and guidelines for both staff and prisoners. Vitally, there needs to be a single point of contact to avoid leaving prison leavers to engage with multiple different services and professionals on their own.
 2. A ‘more personalised approach’ based on individual need is something Switchback’s evidence shows to be essential for better outcomes. Clarity is needed on how this will be achieved in practice. In Switchback’s experience, this requires a holistic approach that does not divide people into different categories, and a skilled, supportive relationship to identify needs and plan support in an appropriate and timely way – things which current levels of investment, caseload sizes and prison culture and conditions do not usually allow.
 3. Accommodation, employment, health and substance misuse are important priorities; a key missing ingredient is a supportive relationship so that people have support to maintain motivation and navigate multiple services to address those needs.
 4. Improving sequencing and information sharing is another sound principle but will require more significant resource and cross-departmental collaboration than currently outlined. A National Resettlement Plan could provide the framework for this.
 5. A ‘compact between the prison leaver and wider society’ is a positive principle but must be truly reciprocal and not solely rely on the prison leaver to comply with rigid conditions without sufficient support and opportunities to build a stable life in work. At present, this compact is heavily one-sided: the person leaving prison must adhere to a list of things they cannot do, but are not provided the basic essentials to survive, are offered few positive options for things they can (like training or jobs), nor the support to overcome their barriers to living life differently.
- From consultation with our Trainees and staff, we urge the government to develop this idea further in three key areas:

The Purpose of the Passport

- The purpose of the proposed Resettlement Passport, to “bring together the key information and services to support prison leavers to address their drivers of repeat offending and ensure a smooth transition into the community” represents a welcome recognition of the need to join up resettlement support around each prison leaver and address the complexity and number of essential services people often struggle to access on release.

- The young men we consulted felt like there was a lack of clarity about what the proposed “document” would contain and how it would work. Trainees argued that, rather than being just a collection of documents, it should be recognised by frontline workers and facilitate access to services. *“It should have some formal power to it so that when people see it, they know exactly what to do.”* MoJ should work closely with frontline experts to ensure the passport is meaningful.
- There was scepticism about the usefulness or ‘power’ of a paper document. The group had a preference for a digital format (*“somewhere I can log in and amend my details”*) but stressed that people might have problems with access to technology and digital literacy. Both physical and digital forms could be available, but 1-to-1 support was seen as the most important factor.
- Concerns were raised about the **name**, particularly calling something a ‘passport’ if it was unlikely to represent true freedom, which would only further mistrust: *“A passport is meant to hold weight, it means that you're a citizen of a country. If you're coming out of prison, that should also hold weight as to why people should help you”*. It was also suggested that the name should not have associations with prison, as this may lead to stigma. *“People are going to look at us as soon as they see that passport and think ‘ah, you’re one of those’.”* MoJ should consult with prison leavers on the right name for the resettlement passport, as well as its purpose and content.
- There was also concern that the passport could be used as a tool to control and “track” people: *“It’s a bit dangerous, because they’ll use it as another form to watch over you.”* While accountability is important, this must work both ways and access to basic essentials to simply survive should not be conditional on behaviour.

Covering all the basics

- The commitment to ensure that “the basics” are in place for prison leavers “to enable them to turn their backs on crime” is very welcome and should take the form of a guarantee to every prison leaver. Provision of the basic essentials needed to survive – access to housing, finance, tech and personalised support – should be a central pillar of a new ‘compact between prison leavers and society’ as suggested in the strategy, and a driver of compliance and change. Switchback has conducted research using our data from during the pandemic, and interviews and workshops with young adult prison leavers, to suggest that priorities for the **basic essentials to survive** should be:
 - **Access to housing.** The strategy’s commitment to expand the 12-week accommodation offer to all prison leavers who need is welcome. Further action will be needed to ensure adequate move-on planning and wrap-around support: during the pandemic Switchback witnessed many young men reaching the end of their 12 weeks and becoming homeless once more, while currently many young men sent to Approved Premises are coming to the end of their tenancies facing homelessness again. A focus on long-term housing, not just short-term accommodation, is needed.
 - **Access to finance.** The strategy’s commitment on ID, and the recent uplift in the Subsistence Payment (formerly the Discharge Grant) are welcome steps in this area. However, a more detailed plan for securing widely accepted ID (i.e., a driving license or passport) will be essential. Moreover, while the £76 Subsistence Payment is a great improvement, we are still seeing Trainees struggle to purchase basic hygiene, clothing and food items upon their release, particularly when waiting for benefits to kick in. By offering shopping vouchers to complement the Subsistence Payment (as Switchback currently does), prison leavers would be able to purchase these basic essentials while containing spending on the right things.

- **Access to technology.** In 2022, access to a basic smartphone with data is not a luxury but a necessity to access vital services and apply for jobs. 1 in 5 Switchback Trainees were released without any phone last year. This is a key missing piece from the ‘basics’ listed in the strategy and should be added as a priority.
- **Travel.** It was raised that travel can be a barrier to accessing essential services: *“The first week is an important week, all those appointments are kicking in. You got to see your GP, you got to see the housing association and these places are all over the place. It’s not like you’re getting released and everything is in that area. You may not even be from that area.”* Offering a weekly travel card on release would ensure that the cost of travel does not prevent prison leavers from getting to essential appointments. Trainees have also suggested that key services should be accessible in one place (for example in a departure launch accessible before release, or in a designated area outside of the prison). MoJ should consider ways to increase co-location of services.

The centrality of 1-to-1 support

- While a Resettlement Passport can play its part, to navigate a complex web of services prison leavers above all require a person: *“a point of contact that is on your side.”* MoJ should recognise the central role of meaningful relationships in enabling people to make a new start on release, and ensure every prison leaver has access to skilled 1-to-1 support.

b. Long-term vision

Q12: Do you agree with our long-term vision?

Q13: Where can we go further in turning prisoners away from crime?

- The long-term commitments on employment (for “the majority” of prison leavers to walk “straight into a job”) and on housing (that no one who is at risk of homelessness will leave prison “without the offer of temporary accommodation”) are very welcome ambitions – particularly on housing, which is cited by Switchback Trainees and staff the most urgent issue holding people back. Given the reality for prison leavers today, meeting these ambitions will require substantial investment and structural change in the system. To improve accountability, we urge the government to provide a timeline for achieving each of these aims.
- The first commitment – for prisoners to “access the treatment they need” and “ensure that this continues upon release” is vital; this principle should be widened from treatment to “support” and expanded beyond health to all areas of life. A long-term resettlement strategy will only succeed if it begins with a commitment to personalised support for every prison leaver, rooted in skilled supportive relationships and a single point of contact.
- Moreover, to achieve this long-term vision which spans policy areas from employment to health and housing, a **cross-government National Resettlement Plan** is needed to enable a multi-agency approach to resettlement. This must bring DWP, MHCLG, MoJ, DH and local provision together to join up services that are currently fragmented, to prevent prison leavers falling through the gaps.
- Finally – and critically - reducing the prison population and tackling racial disparities should be central to any long-term plan for reducing crime, improving public safety and creating a fairer system.

Switchback would be glad to provide further evidence or further information on any of the issues raised in this submission. Please contact sam@switchback.org.uk for further information.

www.switchback.org.uk

February 2022